

**P**robably the most famous, and possibly the most valuable, book in the library of the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies is a very modest gathering of ten folded sheets of brown wrinkled paper that is known as the Dropsie Haggadah. Written in a loopy but very legible semi-cursive oriental hand, the Dropsie Haggadah is the oldest near-complete text of the Passover haggadah in existence.

*The most important—and useful—piece of information in the Dropsie Haggadah, however, is something far more delectable than another textual or ritual variant. It is also a feature of the Haggadah that, lamentably, has hardly received attention from scholars.*

## ***The Dropsie Haggadah*** by David Stern

We know neither the Haggadah's scribe nor precisely when the text was written; the most recent scholarly evaluation has dated it to eleventh-century Egypt. The top of the first page of the haggadah records the Haftorah blessings for Passover—a sign indicating that the booklet we now have was originally part of a larger prayer-book, and that the Dropsie Haggadah came into existence at a time *before* the Passover haggadah had become an independent book in its own right. At some point, however, its owner must have torn the haggadah's pages out from the larger codex—presumably, one imagines, so that he could use it more easily at a seder. At some still later point, after its owner had stopped using the Haggadah, he “buried” it, as was the wont of Cairo Jews, in the later-to-become-famous genizah of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustat, Old Cairo, and from where, in the late 19th century, black-market dealers looted it. Finally, sometime between 1896 and 1901, David Werner Amram (1866-1939), a professor of law at the University of Pennsylvania and a serious bibliophile with a special interest in Hebrew books, bought the Haggadah (with 358 other fragments) in Jerusalem from such black-market dealers, and eventually sold it to Dropsie College—the predecessor

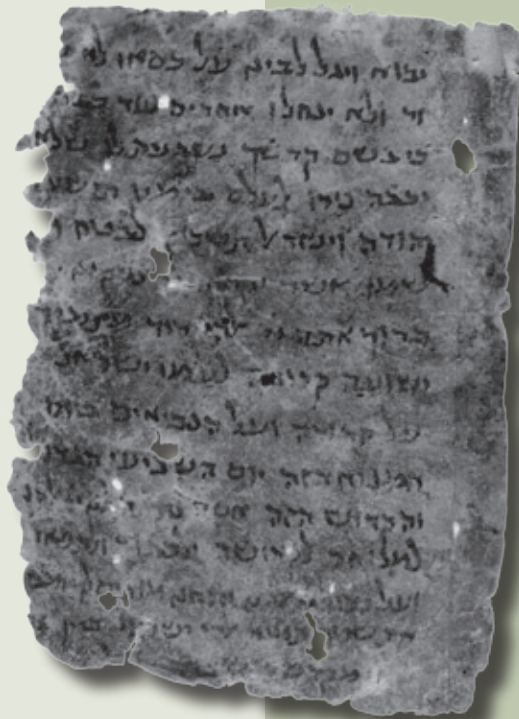
of CAJS—from which the Haggadah received its name. Personally, I wish it were called the Amram Haggadah. David Werner Amram's father, Werner David Amram, was the owner of the first matzah bakery in Philadelphia; evidently, the family had Passover in its blood.

For scholars—indeed for anyone interested in the history of the seder or the haggadah—the Dropsie Haggadah is an invaluable document. For one thing, it preserves the ancient Palestinian version of the seder as it still was used in Egypt as late as the eleventh century. The Palestinian seder was eventually superceded by the Babylonian rite, which ultimately became the near-universal standard with which we are all familiar today; but the Palestinian ceremony was much closer to the “original” seder as it first came into existence in the second and third centuries C.E. That early seder was considerably shorter than ours, and more to the point, without many of the duplications that riddle the full haggadah text we use. For example, the Mah Nishtanah in the Palestinian seder had only three questions, not four, and those questions directly addressed the seder's three main symbolic foods: the Passover sacrifice, the Matzah, and the Marror. So too, the Dropsie Haggadah, in line with the Palestinian

version, includes only one of the two “prologues” to the main part of the haggadah’s re-telling of the Exodus story; after all, who needs two prologues if one is enough? Similarly, the Dropsie Haggadah’s version of the famous midrash on Deut. 26, the heart of the recitation, is also much shorter, with midrashic interpretations only for the very beginning and the very end. The Palestinians obviously felt that a little midrash went a long way and, unlike their Babylonian cousins, they didn’t feel the compulsion to comment upon every single phrase and word.

The most important—and useful—piece of information in the Dropsie Haggadah, however, is something far more delectable than another textual or ritual variant. It is also a feature of the Haggadah that, lamentably, has hardly received attention from scholars.

The first symbolic food eaten at the seder is known as “karpas” (from the Aramaic word for “celery”); commentators see the meaning of this particular food as relating either to the new greens of spring or (through a pun too complicated to translate) to the burdens of heavy labor under which the Israelites toiled in Egypt. In fact, what we know as *karpas*—the celery (or parsley) dipped in salt-water—is simply the lonely, dessicated survivor of the full “appetizer” course that was served before the main course in a typical Greco-Roman banquet in antiquity. The Dropsie Haggadah provides us with invaluable information about what this appetizer course was *really* like, and what eleventh-century Jews in Egypt (like their Palestinian ancestors) *actually* ate for karpas, their hors d’oeuvres. In contrast to our contemporary haggadot, which record only a single blessing for *karpas*, the Dropsie Haggadah has four. The first blessing is similar



to ours—praise for “the Creator of the growths of the earth” (*pri ha’adamah*), namely, vegetables, or greens. It is with the second, third, and fourth blessings, however, that the Dropsie Haggadah’s hors d’oeuvres really take off. The second blessing is for fruit (*bor’ei pri ha’etz*), probably fruit especially associated with the land of Israel like dates and figs and grapes. The third blessing praises “the Creator of many types of delights (*ma’adanim*)” (or, as the accompanying blessing adds, “who delights the souls of mankind”). This blessing, as we know from elsewhere, was specifically

recited over rice mixed with eggs and honey; eggs (seasoned but probably not devilled) were a favorite at Greco-Roman banquets. Finally, the fourth blessing—the most tantalizing of all—praised “the Creator of different types of creatures (*nefashot*),” namely, animals, and was recited over sweetbreads and skewers of grilled meats and sausages (and probably more eggs).

With these blessings, most of which have fallen out of the standard rabbinic liturgy, the Dropsie Haggadah provides us with the incalculably valuable information, not available anywhere else, that the appetizer course at the original seder was not our sad stem of wilted parsley or a celery stick immersed in over-salted water but a *ganze* production of crudités, fruit plates and fancy meats. Then as now—as anyone knows who’s been to a Jewish wedding or seen the film *Goodbye Columbus*—the best course has always been the hors d’oeuvres. This information—the true lesson of the Dropsie Haggadah—should be widely publicized. It shows us how ancient manuscripts provide us not only with truly priceless *useful* information, but also, more importantly, with truly *universal* wisdom: It’s all about food.